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*Is a picture really worth a thousand words?
Some philosophical reflections on perceptual content.*

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Abstract:

The challenge presented by this paper is two fold; the first is to show that theories of perception ride a seesaw which is unsatisfactory, the second is to present a way to dismount the seesaw that these theories ride. The proposed dismount is suggested in the form of nonconceptual content of perceptual experiential states.

In part A of the paper the seesaw metaphor is set up by showing that theories of perception concern themselves mainly with two questions. One of these questions is the epistemic question, which inquiries into the justificatory role played by perceptual experiential states. Such inquiries conclude that the content of perceptual experiential states is conceptual. The other question is the descriptive question, which inquiries into the nature of perceptual experiential states. Such inquiries conclude that the perceptual experiential states are not conceptual. The seesaw effect comes to play because theories of perception deal with the epistemic and the descriptive questions in isolation of each other.

Part B of the paper shows how the theories of perception ride the seesaw. On the one side of the seesaw there are theories of perception that claim that perceptual experiential states are contentless. Bertrand Russell's account of sense-data is used to illustrate such theories. It is shown that

while these theories are phenomenologically plausible they are incapable of accounting for the justificatory role perceptual experiential states need to play. On the other side of the seesaw there are theories of perception that claim that perceptual experiential states have content. The account of conceptualism by John McDowell is used to illustrate the position of such theories. These theories are inadequate in accounting for the phenomenological aspect of perceptual experiential states while they are able to account for the epistemological role played by perceptual states. This is what I call riding the seesaw. Riding the seesaw does not allow any room for progress for a theory of perception.

Part C of this paper suggests a way of dismounting the seesaw by considering the notion of nonconceptual content of perceptual experiential states. The paper acknowledges that work is still necessary to sharpen the notion of nonconceptual content of perceptual states. However, nonconceptual content of perceptual experiential states is put forward as a better alternative in the light of the discussions in parts A and B.

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Metaphors of seesaws have been used before in philosophy, and I will use this same metaphor to show what theories of perception have been doing. A seesaw is a strange device, in that it is never balanced, it either tilts to one side or the other depending on which side the greatest force is placed. As a consequence the seesaw is a stationary device, it never goes anywhere but up and down on either side. This, it seems to me, is the case with theories of perception. While attempting to answer one question all the focus is thereby concentrated on the one particular issue and consequently the second question is lost. When focus is shifted to the second question the first question is then lost. This is the cause of the seesaw effect and as a result no progress into the theories of perception is made. Given this, my aim in this paper is to answer a challenge.

Section IA

The Challenge.

This challenge may be put as follows: There are at least three distinct questions that can be asked about perception, each prompted by a specific interest in the investigation of perception. One area of investigation tries to answer the question of how the senses convey information about the external world to the brain of the subject. Objects in the external world reflect light that is received by the sense organs of a subject. Thus he is

able to discern the whereabouts of things, discover the properties of these things, such as their colours, shapes and sounds, as well as learn about the movements and changes of things in the external world. This is an investigation into the mechanisms of perception, and it is primarily the domain of psychologists and neurologists.

Another area of interest is the way perception gives the subject knowledge about the external world by justifying or providing the reasons for the beliefs a subject holds. Perception causes the subject to have beliefs. Perceptions also, and more importantly here, seem to justify these beliefs in that people cite perceptual experiences to justify certain belief claims. For example, it could be claimed that the perceptual experience of seeing a white door causes the subject to believe that there is a white door as well as gives him a valid reason for believing that there is a white door. In other words, the same perceptual experience both causes and gives reason for a belief the subject holds. The question raised regards the epistemic role of experiences. This is the area of perception that the epistemologist investigates.

Yet another question with regards to perception is about the kind of mental state that it is. In other words, it is an investigation into the nature of perceptual states. It is largely a descriptive question, in that it attempts

to explain how a perceptual state differs from other mental states such as beliefs and judgements. This area of investigation into perception includes the phenomenological aspect of perception – the ‘what it is like’ to have an experience. It is a descriptive interest in that it tries to answer the question of what would be the necessary and sufficient conditions for a state to be called a perceptual experience. This is the area that concerns the philosopher of mind.

My interest in perception stems from the central role it plays in any theory of knowledge and consciousness. Accordingly in this paper I will not be dealing with the investigation into the mechanism of perception. I will be closely looking at the other two areas, namely the epistemological as well as the descriptive questions about perception. These are the two questions that form the seesaw, the epistemic question falls on the one side and the descriptive question falls on the other.

I agree with Tim Crane and Jonathan Dancy that both these questions, that is, the epistemic and the descriptive questions, are conceptually separate and independent from one another and can thus be discussed in isolation.¹ However, I do not think that a theory of perception should treat

¹ Elements of Mind An introduction to philosophy of mind by Tim Crane Oxford University Press 2001 chp 5
Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology by Jonathan Dancy Blackwell 1985 chp 10&11

the one question without attending to the other. The inter-relations between these two questions need to be considered.² I will show that consideration of these two questions in isolation of each other leads to contradictory conclusions as both questions pull in different directions. Reflection on the descriptive question leads to the conclusion that perceptual experiential states do not have conceptual content. While, reflection on the epistemic question leads to the conclusion that perceptual experiential states do have conceptual content. The challenge is to see how to avoid such contradictory conclusions. Thus, it is a two-fold challenge; to show that theories of perception ride a seesaw, and to propose a way of dismounting the seesaw that these two questions create.

Section IB *The Strategy.*

Part A of this paper will deal with the descriptive and the epistemic issues separately. In section II, the descriptive question will be outlined and it will conclude that such consideration would lead to non-conceptualism. Specifically this section will examine the argument for the fine-grain phenomenological features of perceptual experiential states. Thus in this section I will argue for non-conceptualism about perceptual experiential states using reflections on phenomenology. Section III considers the epistemic question, where it would be argued that such a focus leads to

² I will explain what I hold this inter-relation to be at the end of Part A

conceptualism. In this section, mental states, specifically belief states will be used as paradigmatic of mental states with content where they will be closely related to perceptual experiential states to identify any differences and/or similarities between the two states. It will establish that perceptual experiential states have an epistemic role to play as well as distinctive phenomenological features. Thus in this section I will argue for conceptualism about perceptual experiential states using reflections on epistemology. Part A therefore sets up the challenge, which is to relate both the phenomenological and epistemological investigations into perceptual experiential states and thus leading to the seesaw effect.

Part B of this paper will show how theories of perception have tried to deal with the fact that the descriptive and the epistemic questions pull in different directions thereby giving contradictory conclusions and causing the seesaw. Thus, the fourth section will follow with a discussion on sense-data, that is, of non-content-based theories of perception and their refutation. I will, in this section, use Bertrand Russell's account as representative of such theories. In this section I will conclude that theories of perception must have content. The fifth section will develop an analysis of conceptual content theories of perception, and the refutation thereof. Concluding that perception does not have conceptual content. Here I will be referring to John McDowell as representative of

conceptualists. The discussion of these two theories will demonstrate the seesaw.

Part C of this paper will present a solution to the problem. Thus the sixth and final section will develop the notion of non-conceptual content and suggest that non-conceptual content of perceptual experiential states is the better alternative given the outcomes of the previous sections.

Section II *The Descriptive question.*

“Freeze frame example”:

Let us say that, for example, I am sitting on a sandy beach facing the ocean. I see the ocean as blue, but it is not the same blue in all the different parts that fall within my visual field.³ There are a myriad of blues. The reflection of the sun light, the depth of the ocean as well as the movement of the waves give the water its different shades of blue. The same applies to the sand that is also within the same visual field. The sand that I am sitting on is of a different beige shade than the sand closest to the water. My visual perceptual experience of the scene before me is far too detailed for me to be able to put it into words. This of course is neither a matter of time nor of patience. I would not be able to describe my visual experience because I lack the array of concepts to capture all that is present in my experience. Clearly a thousand words would not even begin to do the job. This visual perceptual experience has a phenomenological aspect. It involves all the different shades of colours and shapes.

Fineness of grain:

The ‘Fine-grained’ content of perceptual experience has been much discussed in recent years. To explain the issue I will use the same visual

³ I will be referring to visual perception throughout this paper. However I do not mean to restrict what is said only to visual perception. I mean to include experience through the other senses as well.

experience I have just freeze framed. While sitting on the beach the subject saw the blue water and the beige sand. However, the subject, sitting on the beach in the middle of the afternoon may not recognize all the different shades of blue and beige that are presented in the visual field emitted by the ocean and the sand. Still, the subject is able to discriminate visually between all these different shades of blue and beige. The discrimination that the subject is able to make is based on the way the perceptual experience is presented to him. The fine-grained phenomenology of a subject's perceptual experience is presented in a certain way at the time of the experience.

The difficulties of this issue do not arise from whether there is such fine-grained discrimination or not in the presentational content of perception. The issue is whether such fine-grained content is conceptual or not. The visual experience of the subject on the beach presents the properties of the visual objects far too precisely and distinctively than any description that the subject could hope to formulate, given the concepts to his disposal. There is no finite, determinate amount of things that are possible to say when describing a perceptual experience. In principle there are indefinitely many ways of describing any perceptual experience. This is because in every way that the same perceptual experience is described it picks out particular properties of the object, however the object does not possess a finite amount of properties which once they are picked out there

could be nothing left to say. If the phenomenological aspect of perceptual experience is far too fine-grained for the content to be conceptual it has to be concluded that the content of perceptual experience cannot be conceptual.

The fineness of grain argument focuses reflection on the phenomenology of perceptual experiential states and thus suggests non-conceptualism in the minimal sense, that is, a subject can have the experience even if he does not possess relevant concepts.

At this stage the reflections in this section are not intended to serve as a persuasive argument against conceptualism of perceptual experiential states. I will return to this issue in Part B, section VI, where a number of objections against conceptualism will be presented in detail.

Section III *The Epistemic question.*

Do perceptual experiential states play the same justificatory role as belief states? To answer this question I will first explore the nature of belief states. This is because belief states are paradigmatic examples of a mental state with conceptual content. The lessons learned from this discussion will then be used and compared with perceptual experiential states. Hence it will then be possible to identify differences and similarities between the two mental states, that is, between perceptual experiential states and belief states.

First, I will highlight four relevant features of belief states, namely: they have content; they are propositional; they are normative and they are structured⁴. I will now consider each in turn.

1. What is it for a mental state to have content? A state that has content is a state that is about something. It has 'aboutness'. That is, the mind is directed upon its object. Objects of thought are particulars, properties, events as well as states but not any of these individually.⁵ The use of the word 'object' does not only refer to existing thing in the external world when used in relation to a propositional mental state. If this were not the

⁴ The features I have picked out are widely held to be true of belief states, even if some aspects are controversial. They can be found and defended in both Thornton and Michael Luntley in Contemporary philosophy of thought, truth, world, content, Blackwell, 1999. Since my aim is not to talk about beliefs but about the relation between perceptual experiential states and belief states, I will simply state the claims and not argue for them. My point is that – assuming as I do that the following claim about belief states are correct – what does this then tell us about perceptual experiential states?

⁵ Elements of Mind An introduction to the philosophy of mind by Tim Crane Oxford University Press 2001

case there would not be thoughts about Santa Clause because any such thought is about an object that does not exist in the external world and clearly there are such mental states. These non-existing objects are objects in that they are the subjects of singular terms. They are particulars, which is what they have in common with objects that exist in the external world.

These objects are presented in a certain way to the subject, that is, a presentation has a point of view. This means that certain things are included and others are excluded from the presentation, "it is a view from a certain place and a certain time".⁶ Mental states have content when they present something in a certain way. A subject cannot be in a mental state with content without the state being presented in some way, from some point. Mental content depends on a 'standpoint' in that no mental state with content could be an 'uncovered' presentation of an object, no 'pure reference'. This is the idea that a subject cannot be in a mental state with content without the mental state being held in some particular way.

There is here a relation to Frege's notion of sense.⁷ According to Frege, every expression has both a sense and reference. The reference of a referring expression is the thing that is picked out in the world. For example, the expressions 'London is a metropolitan city' and 'The capital

⁶ Elements of Mind An introduction to the philosophy of mind by Tim Crane Oxford University Press 2001

⁷ On sense and reference, 1892, Reprinted in The Frege reader, Michael Beaney, Blackwell, 1997

of Britain is a metropolitan city' have the same reference in that they pick out the same geographically situated place. However, these two expressions have different senses. The sense of an expression is the way the object referred to is presented to the subject. That is, the sense of an expression is the content of the mental state. 'London' is presented in a different way to 'The capital city of Britain'; both expressions differ in their content. This means that it is possible for a subject to believe the one expression and not the other. The subject could know 'London' but is still able to learn something new when told the expression 'The capital of Britain'.⁸ Thus the content of thoughts/expressions is individuated by the way it is presented to the subject.

2. Now, what is propositional content? It is content that can be expressed by a 'that-clause'. This means that the subject is able to represent facts in a semantic manner. He is able to make a claim that can be assessed as true or false. In other words, propositional content has a truth condition. Here we see a 'link' between a mental state and language, the propositional content of a mental state is fully expressible in language.

3. Content is normative. It is normative in part because the words used to formulate the 'that-clause' can be used correctly or incorrectly, that is, the meaning of the word determines the circumstances under which the word is used correctly. The other part is that a mental state with propositional

⁸ Frege *An Introduction to His Philosophy* by Gregory Currie Harvester Press 1982 chp 4 & 6

content 'prescribes' or determines the conditions that need to be obtained for it to be true.

4. Another 'feature' of belief states is that they are structured. Propositional content states or belief states stand in logical and rational relations to one another, that is, they can justify one another. Only a state with propositional content can justify another state with propositional content. A state with propositional content can be a thought, judgement, desire, belief etc.

Since this fourth feature of belief states is critical to my account of perceptual experiential states, I will develop this aspect further.

Gareth Evans contends that beliefs are structured; they are structured in such a way that they implement different conceptual abilities.⁹ These abilities are the actual possession of a concept by a subject. For Evans, a subject possesses the concept 'whiteness' when the subject knows what it is for a thing to be white and that a concept is something not tied to a particular thing. Possession of a concept is the ability to implement it, that is, the knowledge of what it is for something to be white. In other words, when the subject is presented with a non-white thing he knows that it is not white. To have/possess the concept 'white' is to be able to think about 'white'. In other words, a subject that possesses the concept 'white' has a

⁹ The Varieties of Reference by Gareth Evans, Clarendon Press 1982, Edited by John McDowell pg 100-105

capacity/capacities that people who do not possess the concept 'white' lack. The subject cannot entertain the belief the 'door is white' and be barred from having the belief 'white as snow', 'white shoes', 'egg white' or 'chalk is white', assuming he knows what snow, shoes egg and chalk mean. The subject's ability to understand an initial belief presupposes the ability to understand other related beliefs. This is because beliefs all turn on constituent abilities. The subject does not learn/acquire new/different beliefs one by one, rather, new/different beliefs are adapted via the structure of already possessed repeatable parts, these are concepts. This structure allows the subject to create/construct beliefs that have never been held before, because the component parts of a belief are grasped independently of the use in a particular belief.

So, to use Evans own example, the belief that 'Jack is happy' involves the same conceptual ability as the belief 'Jill is happy', namely the possession of the concept 'happy'. This means that there are certain predictions that can be made as well as a common explanation of the subject's understanding of different propositions. That is, if the subject understands the proposition 'Jack is happy' and the proposition 'Jill is sad' he will be able to understand the proposition 'Jack is sad' and 'Jill is happy'. There would also be a common explanation of the subject's understanding of the propositions 'Jack is happy' and 'Jack is sad', and a common explanation of the propositions 'Jack is happy' and 'Jill is sad'.

The same applies to propositions of the kind 'the box is square' and 'the door is white'. The subject does not have a conceptual barrier to form the propositions 'the box is white' and 'the door is square'. Again there would also be a common explanation when the subject has the belief that 'the box is white' and 'the box is square'.

The result is that it is necessary for the subject to be in a single mental state, or in other words to possess the relevant concepts, for the proposition to obtain/occur. It is impossible for the proposition 'the box is white' not to be the implementation of two different abilities, that is, the possession of two different concepts, or, the possession of a name and a predicate. The belief that 'the box is white' is not just about 'whiteness', it is about the whiteness of an object, the box, door etc. So, for the belief to be about a box rather than about a door the subject must be able to understand other things about 'box'. Without understanding things about 'box' the belief that 'the box is white' has nothing to distinguish it from the belief that 'the door is white'.

"...We thus see the thought that a is F as lying at the intersection of two series of thoughts: on the one hand, the series of thoughts that a is F, that b is F, and that c is F,...and, on the other hand, the thoughts that a is F, that a is G, that a is H,..."¹⁰

¹⁰ The Varieties of Reference by Gareth Evans pp104 footnote21

What Evans is saying here is that understanding the meaning of the belief involves the combination of two separable abilities. The ability to use the name in a variety of beliefs and the ability to use a predicate in a variety of beliefs. So, according to the Generality Constraint, a subject is not able to have a belief unless he is able to recombine the structure of that belief into other structures so as to form other related beliefs. It is in this 'network' way that Evans maintains that beliefs are structured.

The reason I have spent so much time on this issue is that the holistic notion of beliefs is fundamental to rationality. It is because the propositional content of beliefs is structured in a way that it has concepts as its constituent parts that a subject is able to understand a belief and make inferences. Inferences are the hallmark of rationality. Thus inferential abilities are essential to belief states. This is because belief states do not merely represent the facts about the world to the subject. If that were the case, the content of a belief state would not need to have constituent parts because all that would matter would be whether the representational content of the belief is true or false. However, belief states play a major role in the subject's reasoning and because of this the content of a belief state needs to have constituent parts, namely concepts. For, as I said above, a subject who believes that 'a is F and that 'b is F' and also knows that 'a' is not 'b' can also come to the belief that there are at least two distinct things, namely 'a' and 'b' that are 'F'. This would be

an inference, a valid inference. For this to be a valid inference, all (three) belief states, that is, 'a is F', 'b is F' and 'a and b are F', must have the concept 'F' with the same meaning as 'part' of their content. This means that it is only due to the fact that belief states have concepts as their constituents that inferences are possible.¹¹ The ideal of a mental state with propositional content is a belief, the 'that-clause' is assessable as either true or false. Thoughts can also be either true or false, however, beliefs are distinctly bound to truth. This is a specific bind to truth, one that distinguishes beliefs from thoughts and judgements. A belief 'aims' at truth in such a way that what ever the subject believes cannot have the question of its truth independent to that belief. In other words, if the subject is wondering whether his belief is true or false, he is not holding a belief, but rather deliberating whether to hold it or not.

This means that beliefs are states in that they do not have temporal parts whereas a thought is an event in that it does have temporal parts because it is something that 'happens' and thus an action.¹² This distinction between thoughts and beliefs is important because it goes to show that a subject cannot at the same time hold two contradictory/opposing beliefs. That is, it is not possible for S to believe that P and not P at time T. A subject would never be able to hold two contradictory belief states

¹¹ Contemporary philosophy of thought, truth, world, content, by Michael Luntley, Blackwell, 1999, p22

¹² Elements of Mind An introduction to the philosophy of mind by Tim Crane Oxford University Press 2001

because in holding 'that P' the subject is affirming the truth of that proposition and in holding 'that not P' the subject is affirming the truth of that proposition and both propositions cannot be true at the same time T.

In short, mental states (belief) enter into justificatory relations with one another in virtue of their propositional content. Armed with this information, I now move to analyse perceptual states.

Argument for an epistemic role:

Continuing to use the same example, that is, the picture that was freeze framed in section II: In addition to the phenomenological aspects of the visual perception, while the subject is sitting on the beach, he comes to believe that there is an ocean out there. He also comes to believe that he sees the ocean. Both these beliefs are caused by his visual perceptual experience and justified by the same visual perceptual experience. In light of the above discussion where I argued that for a mental state to play an epistemic role it must be conceptually structured, do the visual experiences justify other states, namely belief states? Do perceptual experiential states play an epistemic role? The answer is Yes. However this answer needs to be backed up as it goes against some current thinking.

According to these theorists, perceptual experiential states do not enter into a justificatory relationship with belief states. Perceptual experiential states cause belief states and not justify them. This is known as 'coherentism'.¹³ As Donald Davidson puts it "only a belief can justify a belief". As such, perceptual experiential states cannot play a justificatory role. In contrast it seems to me that perceptual experiential states can justify belief states.

To see this, we must consider the example of chicken-sexers often invoked as an argument by coherentism theorists. The chicken-sexer is able to reliably sort out newly born chickens into males and females by inspecting them. However the chicken-sexer is unable to give reasons for his belief that a particular chick is either male or female. Thus, the chicken-sexers industry 'phenomenon' suggests that the chicken-sexer knows the sex of the chick that he is inspecting.¹⁴ This supports coherentism because it is an example where the subject has a belief that is caused by the experience but not justified by it.

I would argue that these coherentist inspired thoughts are wrong. The chicken-sexers example only gives a coherentist conclusion because of the way it is told. That is, the chicken-sexer example is a rare case, in that it seem plausible to say that the chicken-sexer is not justified but caused

¹³ I will be referring back to coherentism when I present a diagram to illustrate it in Part B.

¹⁴ Chicken-sexers Industry story found in the article Insights and Blindspots of Reliabilism by Robert B. Brandom, *Monist* 81, 1998, p371-92

to believe that the newly hatched chick is male or female as he is unable to give reasons for his belief. Thus there is no justification for the chicken-sexer's belief but a causation of the belief. I am in agreement with the coherentist, I do not think that the chicken-sexers are justified in their belief about the sex of the newly hatched chick. However, and this is where I differ from the coherentist, the chicken-sexer is not justified in holding the belief precisely because he lacks the experience that would justify his belief. The chicken-sexer's experience is a 'weird' experience because he lacks the very experience. The chicken-sexer has not formed a justified belief without experiencing the sex of the chick; the chicken-sexer's belief about the sex of the chick will only be justified if he has experienced the sex of the chick. Thus the chicken-sexer example is no support for coherentism.

Perceptual experience must give reasons, that is, they must justify a subject's beliefs about the world. In other words, perceptual experience must enter into justificatory relationship with belief states. As was pointed out in section II, a belief state is normative in that the content of a belief or a judgement corresponds or not to the way things are in the world. This means that the subject's belief states are "answerable" to the external world. In other words, there is a justificatory relationship between the subject's mind and the world. Thus we need empirical

knowledge to assess the way things are in the external world. As John McDowell puts it:

“Even if we take it that answerability to how things are includes more than answerability to the empirical world, it nevertheless seems right to say this: since our cognitive predicament is that we confront the world by way of sensible intuition, our reflection on the very idea of thought’s directedness at how things are must begin with answerability to the empirical world.”¹⁵

Perceptual experience mediates between the subject’s thoughts and the way the world is. Because the subject is exposed to the external world via sense experience, the subject must have rational access to the external world. In other words, there must be more than a causal relation between the subject’s belief states and the external world, there must be a logical relationship as well. Such a relation, a logical relation, can only be conceived of as a relation that holds between conceptually organized entities (given the discussion in section II). Perceptual experience needs to fall within the “space of reason”. For, as we saw, reason implies inference and such inferences are not possible if the content is not conceptual. The “space of reason” cannot be extended beyond the realm of conceptual content. Therefore, perceptual experiences must have

¹⁵ Mind and World by John McDowell, Harvard University Press, 1996, pxii

conceptual content if perceptual experiential states enter into justificatory relations with the subject's belief states.

Consequently, if, as I have just argued, using the chichen-sexers and answerability discussions, perceptual experiential states play a justificatory role, then, as has been learnt from the case of belief states in section III, perceptual experiential states must have conceptual content.

Thus we see that reflection on the epistemic role of perceptual experiential states suggests conceptualism. Conceptualism is the theory that perceptual experiential states are conceptual states. Conceptualists link perceptual experiential states to concepts via their content.

Granting this link to the conceptualist, the fact that perceptual experiential states enter into justificatory relations with belief states and thereby contending to the similarity in content between perceptual experiential states and belief states, perceptual experiential states are not belief states.

Differences with belief states:

Having stated that a perceptual experiential state is not a belief state the obvious question is: What is a perceptual experiential state? In attempting to answer this question I will superimpose what has been learnt about

belief states over perceptual states. Thus I can ask: Do perceptual states have the same features as belief states?

As I will now show, the discussion above helps draw out some distinctions between perceptual experiential states and belief states.

For one thing it is possible for a subject to hold a belief 'that p' and a perceptual experience 'not p' at the same time T. This can be seen in the Muller-Lyer illusion, just to mention one very often used example. The subject cannot help but see that the one line with the end arrow pointing inwards is longer than the other line with the end arrows pointing outwards even if the subject know (because he has measured them) and thus believes that both lines are of equal length. However, if perceptual states were the same as belief states this would be equivalent to the subject holding two contradictory beliefs at the same time. As was shown above, this is not possible.

Yet another distinction is the fact that inferences are not possible between perceptual experience whereas inferences are the hallmark of beliefs. (This is not to say that inferences are not possible between a perceptual experiential state and a belief state.) Again, if a subject has a particular experience that 'a is F' and also has a particular experience that 'a is G', it is not possible for the subject to infer the 3rd perceptual experience that 'a is F and G'.

Still another distinction between belief states and perceptual experience is that perceptual experiences are not holistic. For a subject to have a perceptual experience P, he does not have to have other perceptual experiences. Whereas, as we saw above, for a subject to have the belief 'that P' he must have certain other related beliefs. Perceptual experiences can exist in isolation of each other. The subject simply perceptually experiences the external world ¹⁶

All the above distinctions between belief states and perceptual experiential states are due to the phenomenological aspect of perceptual experiential states but have epistemological consequences. This means that the differences pointed to are brought forward by considering the descriptive question about perception yet these differences are inextricably related to the epistemic question about perception

Despite these differences, as we have seen, perceptual experiential states enter into a justificatory relation with belief states, which means that there is also a similarity between perceptual experiential states and belief states. The differences do not undermine the core similarity between perceptual experiential states and belief states, namely the fact that both belief states and perceptual experiential states play a justificatory role.

However, the similarity does not undermine the differences either. It is

¹⁶ All of these distinctions are to be found in Tim Crane's The nonconceptual content of experience, chp 6 p150 - 154

these differences and similarities of perceptual experiential states to belief states that contribute to the seesaw effect when considering a theory of perception.

I would now like to justify my claim that though the descriptive and the epistemological questions pull in different directions they are grounded in the same analysis.

In answering my title question, "Is a picture really worth a thousand words?" one must, I think, involve both the descriptive and the epistemological issues. As I understand this question it is about whether a subject is able to see (have a visual experience) without having concepts at his disposal. It is about the content of perception. It is a question that debates the issue of whether perceptual content is conceptual or not, and most everyone in current literature is likely to agree that concepts are epistemic capacities. Consequently when dealing with the nature of the content of perceptual experiential states, the epistemic issues are necessarily involved. Therefore I believe that an analysis of perception should deal with both the epistemic and the descriptive questions. A theory of perception needs to find a way to dismount the seesaw by dealing with both the epistemic and the descriptive questions in conjunction with each other.

Summarising Part A:

By denying concepts to the content of perceptual experiential states and thereby accounting for the fine-grain phenomenological issues, such as, difference in human infant and animal perception, as well as concept learning issues, the role that perceptual experiential states play in forming beliefs and justifying these same beliefs is inadvertently shaken/brought into question.¹⁷ On the other hand, by describing the content of perceptual experience to be conceptual, thereby attending to the epistemic problems, the phenomenological issues are brought to the foreground. As a consequence, when dealing with the descriptive and the epistemological questions in isolation of each other, the problems are 'created' for either investigation that is not being dealt with. It is now possible to understand why theorists take either the epistemic issues or the descriptive issues as their focal line of argument in favour of either a conceptualist or non-conceptualist views of perceptual content. Depending which question they focus their analysis will result in support for their conceptualist or non-conceptualist conclusions respectively. This is the seesaw of perceptual theories.

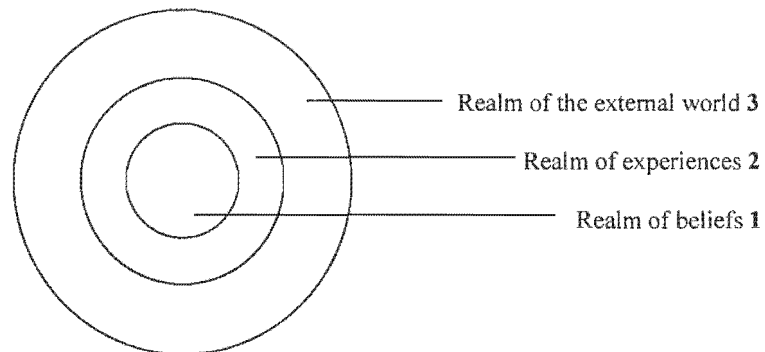
¹⁷ All these issues will be clarified and dealt with in this paper in due course.

Having set up the seesaw, I will now demonstrate how it is ridden. Thus this part of the paper, with the use of diagrams, will now illustrate how theories of perception attempt to get around the fact that investigations into the epistemic and the descriptive nature of perceptual experiential states pull in different directions. Each attempt will be shown to be defective, which is how these theories ride the seesaw.

The diagrams found in the book by Martin Kusch have inspired the use of diagrams in this paper.¹⁸ However, some modifications to these diagrams have been made to suite the needs of this paper since the interest lies in the relationships between the external world, the perceptual experiential states and belief states. Accordingly the diagrams will involve three different realms: the inner circle represents the realm of belief states and is numbered 1, the middle circle represents the realm of experiential states and it is numbered 2, and the outer circle represents the realm of the external world and this is numbered 3. A realm that is represented by a blue line indicates that that particular realm is conceptual. Any realm that is represented by a red line indicates a realm that falls within the space of reason. Thus it is possible that certain realms be represented by both red and blue line which would mean that the particular realm falls

¹⁸ Knowledge by Agreement by Kusch Martin, Oxford University press, 2002, p93, 94 &103

both within the space of concepts and reason. The positions that will be diagrammatically represented are those of Coherentism, Reliabilism, Foundationalism and Direct Realism respectively.



Standard for diagrams

As I mentioned earlier, coherentism tries to solve the problem by holding that perceptual experiential states do not justify belief states – this is represented in diagram a. Perceptual experiential states are conceptual states and they cause belief states, which are also conceptual states.¹⁹ However, coherentism was refuted in section III where it was established that perceptual experiential states do in fact play a justificatory role and thus it presents no solution to the problem of this paper.

¹⁹ As I am aware that I am not doing justice to coherentism for further discussion see a paper by Donald Davidson, Coherence theory of truth and knowledge in Truth and interpretation edited by Lepore, Blackwell, 1989 and The current state of coherence theory by J. W. Bender, Kluwer, 1989

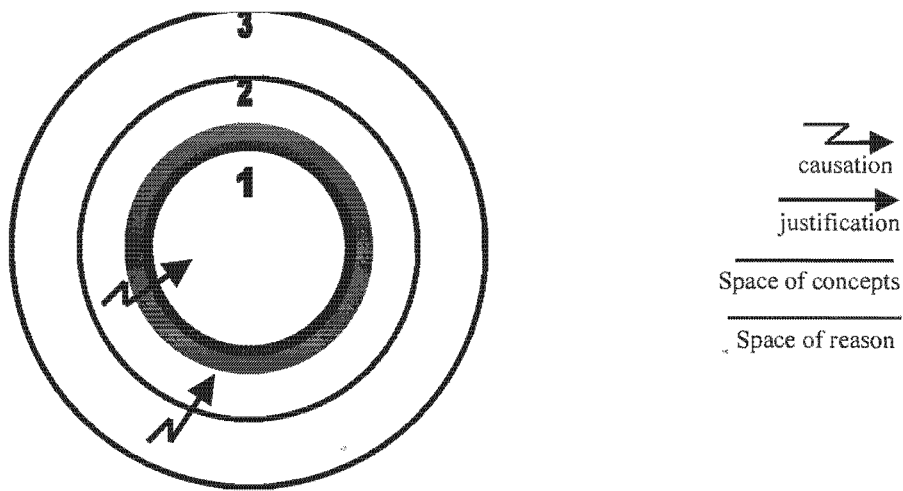


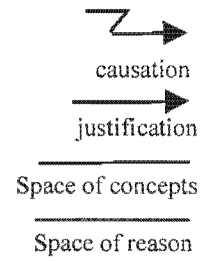
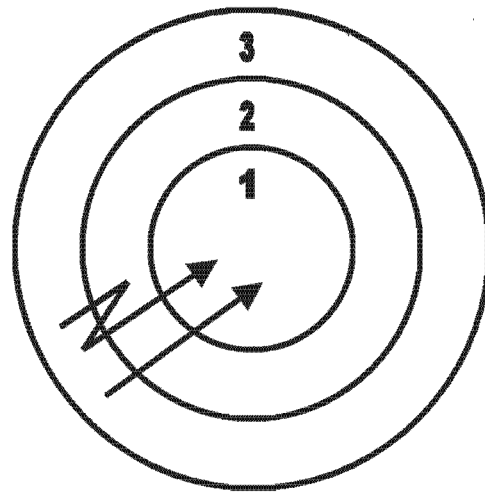
Diagram a

Reliabilism, diagram b, tries to solve the problem by holding that perceptual experiential states justify belief states in virtue of the fact that perceptual experiential states cause belief states.²⁰ As far as this theory is concerned neither the content of perceptual experiential states nor the content of belief states is conceptual. Thus conceptual content is eliminated entirely from the three realms. In consequence of doing away with concepts reliabilism does away completely with reason. As a result this theory falls outside the scope of this paper and thus is no solution to the problem under consideration. Reliabilism deserves deeper discussion, however seeing that it is far removed from the issues of this paper I am here merely noting the theory for completeness but not for a discussion in detail.²¹

²⁰ For further discussion see: Epistemology and cognition, by Alvin Goldman, Harvard university press, 1985 and Naturalizing epistemology, by Hillary Kornblith, MIT press, 1997

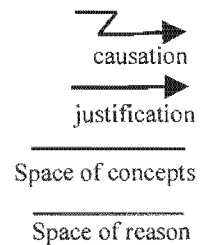
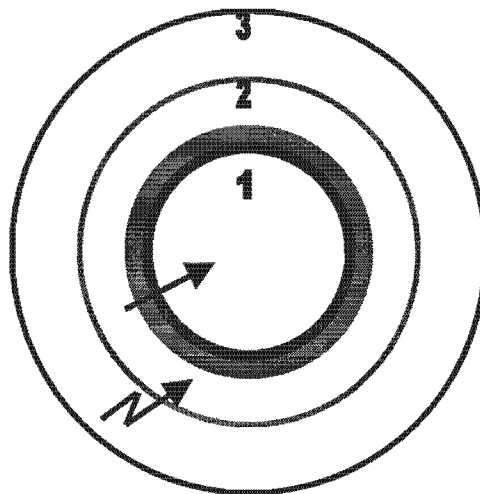
²¹ One paper that highlights the big gap between Reliabilism theories and Normative theories is by Jaegwon Kim, 1988, What is naturalized epistemology, found in Philosophical Perspectives 2, p381-405. Kim distinguished between epistemology as a normative inquiry which deals with reasons and outcomes such as Reliabilism which remove normative questions, arguing the former.

Diagram b

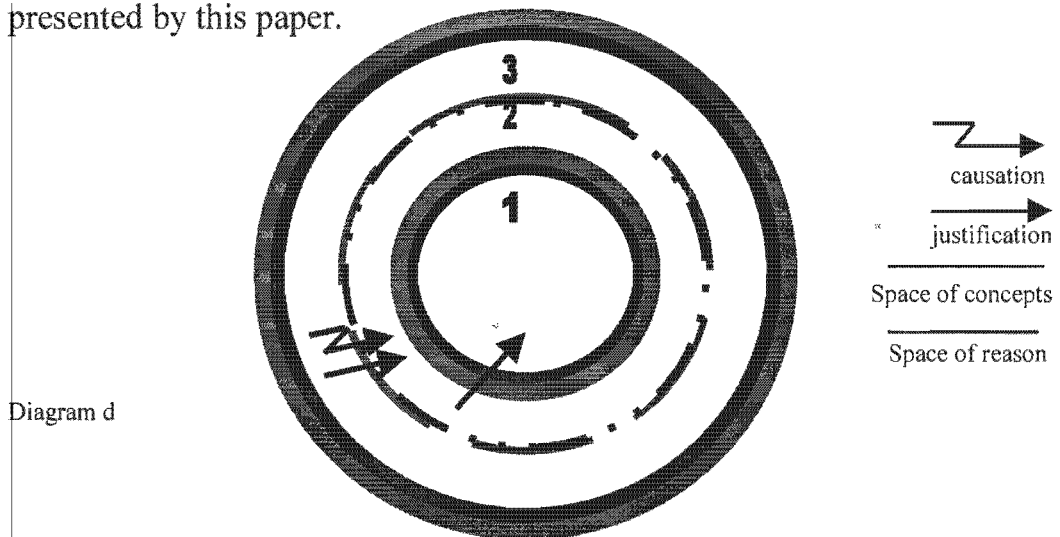


Foundationalism, diagram c, tries to solve the problem by holding that the external world causes the perceptual experiential states while these states justify the belief states. According to foundationalism, it is only the content of belief states that is conceptual. Perceptual experiential states are not conceptual states. The discussion in section IV will conclude that such a theory should be refuted as a solution to the problem presented by this paper.

Diagram c



Direct Realism, diagram d, tries to solve the problem by holding that the content of perceptual experiential states is conceptual and thereby justifies belief states whose content is of course also conceptual. In section V this position will also be refuted as a solution to the problem presented by this paper.



Both the positions illustrated by the diagrams c and d will be accompanied by a discussion in sections IV and V respectively. In section IV I will be using Russell's account of foundationalism as it appears in The Problems of Philosophy to make the position more detailed so that it can be evaluated. I will then argue that once these details have been spelt out, it is clear that such a position is incapable of solving the problem as I have posed it. In section V I will be using McDowell's account of direct realism as found in Mind and World. I will continue to argue that this position is equally incapable of solving the problem as I have formulated it.

One of the things that is particularly noted when reflecting on sense experience is the undeniable 'raw' experience' of sensations such as pain, colour, sounds and shapes. Given that there is an external world, realm 3 on the above diagram, it is the external world that impinges itself on the senses and causes the subject to have some sense experience, realm 2 on the diagram. It is this information, which is 'delivered' via the senses, that the subject is first conscious of and has a perceptual experience. Thus perception is what relates the subject of a sense experience to the external world. In other words, perception is the relationship between realms 2 and 3.

The question now is whether the subject is directly perceiving the external world itself or whether the subject is perceiving the effects this external world has on him. The way this question is answered results in a contrast between a direct or indirect realist theory of perception. Realist with regards to perception, means that the objects the subject perceives exist and retain (some of) their properties independently of the subject's perception of them. To directly perceive an object is to perceive the object itself without any intermediary of any kind. While to indirectly perceive an object is for the subject to be aware of something other than the object itself. On this view the subject is never directly aware of the

external physical object.²² Referring to the diagram represented above, for direct realism, realm 2 is interrelated with realm 3, whereas for indirect realism, realm 2 is independent from realm 3. What makes realms 2 and 3 interrelated or distinct is what the subject of an experiential state is conscious of, either the physical object or an intermediary of some kind.

The subject cannot be experiencing the external world directly because, the argument goes, a subject of a perceptual experiential state could be having a hallucination. Hallucinations illustrate the way a subject can have the same experience whether the external world causes it or not. When the subject has a hallucination, the object of his experience does not exist in the external world, it exists only in the subject's mind. On the other hand when the subject has a veridical (not a hallucination, dream or such) experience, the object of his experience exists in the external world. However, the perceptual experiential state of the hallucination and the perceptual experiential state of the veridical case are indistinguishable from each other, that is, phenomenologically indistinguishable.²³ Since in both cases the experience is

²² Direct and Indirect realism was of major interest in the middle of the last century. Their interest stemmed from their desire to understand what makes knowledge possible. I do not want to enter into this debate. Refer to: Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology by Jonathan Dancy, Blackwell, 1985 chp 10 & 11. As Tim Crane points out if perception is understood as what is 'given' in sense experience then it makes no difference whether it is the physical object itself or some intermediary entity. It makes no difference, that is, for my purpose in this paper. My interest in this section is to analyse theories of perception without content and refute them.

²³ There is a real question here as to whether the two perceptual experiences are phenomenologically identical.

phenomenologically indistinguishable, it would be reasonable to infer that what the subject is directly aware of in the veridical case are the effects of the external world on the subject and not the physical external world itself. The difference between the veridical and hallucinatory cases is not in 'what' the subject is aware of but rather in what causes the perceptual experience: in the veridical case it is the external world, whereas in the hallucination it is the mind itself.

This argument is supposed to show that the perceptual experiential state of the subject is of an intermediary object. These intermediary objects are supposed to be 'presentations' of what is causing them, that is, presentations of the external world.²⁴ These presentations are dependent on the conditions under which they are experienced.

There is a distinction, made by John Locke between primary and secondary qualities of an object. Primary qualities of physical objects are shapes, size, and motion etc. while secondary qualities are colours, smells, taste, heat etc. According to J. Lock, a physical object retains its secondary qualities only for as long as a subject is perceiving that object, however the object does retain its primary qualities when it is not being perceived by a subject. For Russell, both primary and secondary

²⁴ The word 'representations' is used in the context of belief states implying that there is conceptual content and structure. It is also used for perceptual states, so to avoid carrying over the mentioned implication I will follow others and use the word 'presentation'.

properties of a physical object do not 'belong' to the physical object itself, they are the presentation of the physical object. As Russell puts it

“[C]olour is not something which is inherent in the table, but something depending upon the table and the spectator and the way the light falls on the table.”²⁵

And

“The shape of the table is no better....if we try to draw, a given thing looks different in shape from every different point of view....what we see is constantly changing in shape as we move about the room;”²⁶

The conditions under which the presentations are 'manifested' are used in another argument by Russell to establish the independence of perceptual experiential states from the external world. Russell argues that because the colour of a table that is viewed from different angles and under different light conditions exhibits a different shade, then, strictly speaking, the table has no particular colour. Colour fluctuates too much to belong to the table. However, what the subject is immediately/directly aware of in perceptual experience has a definite colour. The same applies to shapes. Russell uses the example of a penny. The shape of the penny changes depending on the point of view of the subject, thus the penny cannot be said to be of one particular shape rather than another. However, the subject's immediate/direct perceptual experience has a definite shape.

²⁵ The Problems of Philosophy by Bertrand Russell, Oxford University Press 1980 p2

²⁶ The Problems of Philosophy by Bertrand Russell, Oxford University Press 1980 p3

Hence, what the subject is immediately/directly experiencing is not the external world but rather the presentations.

As was said above these presentations are the colours, shapes, sizes, smoothness and movements of the external world, and to revert back to the above diagram, this means that realm 2 is a presentation of realm 3 but is nonetheless independent from realm 3.

They, the presentations, are here and now, that is, they are in time. The connection between presentations and time leads to the claim that whatever is presented in experience exists now, at the time of the experience.²⁷ Presentations are objects of awareness in the sense that they have properties. Consequently the subject is in a relation with the presentation.²⁸ Presentations are 'the Give' and commonly known as 'sense-data'. Sense-data are considered to be incorrigible because they are known directly only to the subject and therefore necessarily leave no room for error. The mind of the subject directly grasps/apprehends the sense-data. Acquaintance with sense-data is a way of knowing a thing, it is not a way of knowing facts about that same thing. Experiencing sense-data is being in some relation to an object and not possessing facts about

²⁷ This may be a small but important point as to the difference between perceptions and beliefs. Existence of presentations is different to existence in Thoughts, for it is possible to think about something that does not exist but not possible to have a sense perception of something that does not exist at the time of the experience.

²⁸ Adverbial theories of perception would want to deny this. Such theories prefer to analyse the experience as a way of being aware. On this account an experience is not an object of awareness. See Epistemology by Robert Audi, Routledge 1998, chp 1

that object. Thus sense-data lack propositional content, they can neither be true nor false, thereby making them incorrigible.

“We shall say that we have acquaintance with anything of which we are directly aware, without the intermediary of any process of inference or any knowledge of truths.”²⁹

When sense-data are experienced, the subject knows them completely. There is no further information that can be added to the subject’s knowledge about the experience.

It is via sense-data that a subject gets to know the external world, using Russell’s terminology; acquaintance with sense-data is the way the subject knows the external world. Thus sense-data are a form of knowledge, namely knowledge by acquaintance.

It is through knowledge by acquaintance that knowledge of truths is derived. The apprehension of sense-data is a form of mental state that is not a belief itself but has the capability to justify a belief. Knowledge of truths, what the subject judges to be the case in the sense that applies to beliefs, is derived from, and therefore is justified by acquaintance with sense-data. For the subject to have any knowledge of truths about an object he must know some truth connecting the object in the external world with the sense-data of his acquaintance. The subject “...must

²⁹ The Problems of Philosophy by Bertrand Russell, Oxford University Press 1980 p25

know that such-and-such sense-data are caused by the physical object.”³⁰

This establishes the causal relation between realms 3 and 2. So, the subject believes that the perceived external object is a table because he is immediately/directly acquainted with the sense-data, that is, with the shape, size, colour etc. From this acquaintance the subject infers that what he perceives is a table in the external world. Knowledge of truths arises when the subject considers sense-data as indicating an external physical object. It is in this way that knowledge of the external world is knowledge by description.

Knowledge by description always involves knowledge of truths, which is derived from acquaintance with sense-data. As Russell puts it Knowledge by description is

“deduced from self-evident truths by use of self-evident principles of deduction”.³¹

A subject knows an object by description when he knows that the object is ‘the so-and-so’. The phrase so-and-so stands for the properties of the object. In other words knowledge by description is knowledge of facts about the object.³² Knowledge by description then has propositional content. Knowledge by description falls within realm 1, that is, the realm of belief states. On this theory, realm 1 is justified and not caused by

³⁰ The Problems of Philosophy by Bertrand Russell, Oxford University Press 1980, p26

³¹ The Problems of Philosophy by Bertrand Russell, Oxford University Press 1980 p63

³² The Problems of Philosophy by Bertrand Russell, Oxford University Press 1980 p28, 29

realm 2. This is because inferences and deductions are possible between realms 1 and 2.

It is important to point out that the use of the word 'knowledge' in knowledge by acquaintance is not used in the epistemological sense. Such knowledge requires the use of the cognitive system (inferences and such) and Russell has ruled that out by denying truth value and propositional content to knowledge by acquaintance. The word 'knowledge' as used in knowledge of truths is used to include the subject's cognitive system.

If I said that there is a book on my desk and you asked me how I came to know (believe) that there is a book on the desk, I will tell you that I know this because I see it on my desk. Of course this example brings in the many issues that I am directly concerned with in this paper. The word 'seeing' plays a crucial role here. Is seeing (experiencing a booming buzzing confusion) the book enough for me to know that I am seeing (seeing it as something) a book? For Russell, seeing the book on the table means that the subject is, as I said above, directly acquainted with the shape, colour and size of the book and from this infer that it is a book. However, when the subject becomes acquainted with the sense-data he is seeing them as the shape, size and colour of that specific experience. In order for the subject to do this he must somehow know that that particular shape, size and colour are that shape, size and colour. Russell would agree with this. He argues that for a subject to identify a colour as red he

must know what redness is. Here is where he brings in the notion of “universals”.

The subject is directly acquainted with universals, such as ‘redness’, ‘smoothness’ and ‘roundness’ that is, he directly ‘conceives’ or is aware of the universals. This happens through the process of learning by “abstraction”. When the subject experiences sense-data, he is acquainted with the particulars of the universals. Particulars exist in time whereas universals do not. For example, when the subject sees the rectangular shape of the book he is acquainted with a rectangle, here specifically of the book. This rectangle exists at least at the time of the experience, and it is this rectangle which is the particular of the universal rectangleness. Through repeated experiencing of particular rectangles, of books, pencil-boxes etc; the subject learns to be acquainted with the universal. This is the way the subject is directly acquainted with universals. In Russell’s words:

“When we see a white patch, we are acquainted, in the first instance, with the particular patch; but by seeing many white patches, we learn to abstract the whiteness which they all have in common, and in learning to do this we are learning to be acquainted with whiteness.”³³

³³ The Problems of Philosophy by Bertrand Russell, Oxford University Press 1980, p58 chp 10

Universals are also denied propositional content and truth conditions as they are known to the subject by acquaintance and not by description.

Universals are thus just as incorrigible as sense-data.

At this stage I wish to evaluate the account that has just been presented here in the name of Russell. To do so I wish to introduce some terminology due to Fred Dretske. There is a distinction that can be made between 'seeing' and 'seeing as'. One of the first things that needs to be pointed out is that when talking about 'seeing'; it is the external objects in the physical world that are being referred to, such as dog, building, people and flashes. Talk about 'seeing' then is not about the facts, such as who the person is, where the dog is, how high the building is and that it is bright. Facts about objects imply the use of conceptual resources. 'Seeing' an object is having a sense experience in the visual field. It is experiencing a booming, buzzing confusion.³⁴ No degree of recognition or conceptualisation is necessary for the subject to see an object. This means that that seeing an object is independent of beliefs. It is in no way obvious that the subject must have beliefs to be able to see an object. The contrary seems obvious when considering seeing in infants, chimpanzees, dogs and goldfish. Experiencing of this kind is a mental state without content. This is to be distinguished from 'seeing as'

³⁴ Using the words of William James.

which is to experience an object as something. For example, experiencing something as a book or as a desk. Thus it is a state that has content. 'Seeing as' is like a judgement, in that it is either true or false. It has propositional content.

The distinction is a controversial distinction because it is concerning the possibility of 'seeing' an external object without having a belief of any kind about the object presented in the subject's mind. It is a question whether it is possible to see an object without seeing it from some point of view. Or, to put it in different words, whether it is essential/necessary to see an object as something if the subject is to be able to see the object at all.³⁵ It is about the content of perceptual states.

Now, using this vocabulary, let me turn to an evaluation of Russell's account. Understood as Russell intended, knowledge by acquaintance is *priori* to language and any cognitive state, for both language and cognitive states are knowledge by description. What is Russell's answer to the question of whether it is necessary for a subject to have beliefs in order for him to be able to see an object? It seems that according to Russell 'seeing' is *priori* to 'seeing as', in that the subject is acquainted with sense-data, a state without content, and from this the subject is able to perceive the object, or in other words, to see the object as something, a

³⁵ Fred Dretske makes such a distinction in his Perception, Knowledge and Belief Cambridge University press 2000 chp 6

book, a state with propositional content. The perceived physical object is inferred from the sense-data. It is difficult to distinguish between 'seeing' and 'seeing as' on Russell's account resulting in an unclear and unsatisfactory account of perception. Russell cannot possibly mean 'seeing' when he talks about the subject identifying an object of sense experience as white because for the subject to be able to experience a sense-datum as white he must have already grasped whiteness which in turn means that he is perceiving the object, that is, seeing it as white. Thus knowing the object by description that would bring into play the entire cognitive system, namely beliefs and thus propositional content. However for Russell, as shown above, grasping whiteness is learned after acquaintance with different particulars of white so he must mean 'seeing' and not 'seeing as'. It is therefore difficult to say with certainty that Russell holds that it is possible to see an object without holding any belief whatsoever. Or, to see an object without seeing it as something, that is, without perceiving it. I am merely gesturing to this difficulty in Russell's writing, however it is a difficulty that ultimately plagues all sense-data theories. This is because sense-data are mental states without content.

According to such theories, sense-data do not have content, however they justify belief states, which do have content, specifically, propositional content. The way that sense-data justify beliefs is due to the way that the

subject is related to the experience, by acquaintance, rather than to propositions. The most important aspects of the knowledge derived from sense-data is that it is “epistemically independent”. This means that the epistemic status that sense-data has is not derived from any other epistemic state.³⁶ The other important aspect is that it provides epistemic support as well as add to the epistemic status of the other mental states that the subject has. Both these aspects of sense-data are in virtue of the fact that it does not have propositional content. Thus it is not possible for sense-data to provide justification for belief state as only another state or event with propositional content can enter into a justificatory relationship.

This follows from the Generality Constraint discussed in part A of this paper. Perceptual experience necessarily without propositional content cannot engage in an inferential relationship that necessarily involves states with propositional content. For a subject’s belief ‘that p’ to be inferred from a perceptual experience ‘q’, the perceptual experience ‘q’ must also have propositional content. And, for perceptual experience ‘q’ to justify the belief ‘that p’, the subject must be able to grasp the perceptual experience ‘q’ and that can only be the case if both the belief ‘that p’ and the perceptual experience ‘q’ had propositional content.

Therefore, if perceptual experience is to serve as justification for the

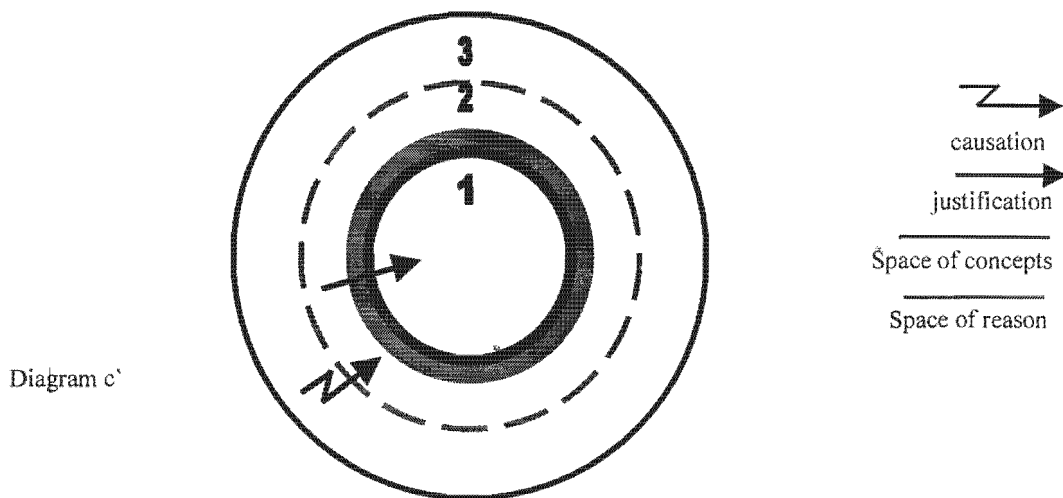
³⁶ The word ‘epistemic’ is meant to include the notions of knowledge as well as the related issues of evidence, certainty and justification.

beliefs of a subject, the experience must have content. That is, the perceptual experience must have propositional content to be able to enter into a justificatory relationship with a belief.

Another way of showing the same point is to refer to the distinction that was pointed to above between the use of the words 'knowledge' in knowledge by acquaintance, and 'knowledge' in knowledge by description. Sense-data theories infer knowledge by description from knowledge by acquaintance. This however is problematic, for the argument is using the same word with two different meanings. In knowledge by acquaintance the word 'knowledge' does not carry the epistemic connotations. It is not propositional knowledge. On the other hand in 'knowledge by description' the word 'knowledge' carries with it all the epistemic connotations and is thus propositional knowledge. Therefore the inferences between these two kinds of knowledge cannot happen because of an equivocation.

In light of the criticism just put forward against theories of perception that deny content to perceptual experiential states, I would now like to introduce a revised version of diagram c. This new diagram represents the theory more accurately in the light of my critique. The dotted line of realm 2 represents the fact that perceptual experiential states are contentless as is realm 3, the external world. Thus blurring the distinction

between realms 2 and 3. The new foundationalism diagram (c') illustrates the conclusion that sense-data theories are epistemologically incorrect, though phenomenologically plausible. Such an account is phenomenologically plausible because perceptual experiential states that have no content can easily deal with the issue of fineness of grain as outlined in section II. Perceptual experiential states, on this account, are similar enough to the external world, in that both realm 2 and 3 are contentless, for the subject to be able to 'capture' the existing detailed discriminations.



In conclusion, then, perceptual experiential states are not contentless, since understanding perceptual experiential states as contentless would in effect disregard the epistemological concerns. This is due to the fact that the focus of such a theory has been the descriptive nature of perceptual experiential states. Does this mean the content of perceptual experiential

states must be conceptual? The next section will be a discussion of this question.

In this section I will consider Direct realist accounts that conceptualise perceptual experiential states. The most recent prominent expert on this issue is John McDowell.

McDowell insists that only a state with conceptual content can enter into the required justificatory relationship with a belief state. To be able to justify empirical beliefs it is necessary to identify a rational relation between perceptual experiential states and belief states. To hold that perceptual experiential states justify on the bases of received presentations independently of the conceptual capabilities of the subject can only lead to the 'Myth of the Given'.³⁷ This is the idea by Wilfred Sellars that theories that set up perceptual experiential states as that which is given, such as the discussed sense-data in section IV, are mistaken. Sellars' point is that theories of the given have confused sense experience with conceptual states. This is a confusion between causal conditions for the formation of belief states and justification for these belief states. The relationship between sense-data and belief states is a causal relationship in that sensations are what cause the subject to have the beliefs. However since this relationship is causal it is not propositional. Since it is not

³⁷ Knowledge Mind and the Given by DeVries and Triplett, 2000, pxxv-xxxii

propositional the subject cannot have rational or cognitive access to the sensations and they therefore cannot enter into a justificatory relationship with belief states. A causal explanation illustrates how belief states are formed, but such an explanation cannot show how and why a belief state is justified. Sensations cannot enter into a logical relationship with content of belief states. Sensations and justifications belong to different 'realms'.

Thus McDowell sets out to develop a conception of perceptual experiential states that includes both the logical and the causal relation that he wants perception to play. To relate this to the diagram of Direct Realism above, it would mean that realms 1, 2 and 3 are conceptual and thereby allowing for a justificatory relation. This theory he sets up against a Kantian background, which involves the interplay between 'sensibility' and 'understanding'. Sensibility or another way of expressing the same thing is 'receptivity', which is the source of 'intuitions' ("bits of experiential intake"),³⁸ is the way in which the subject is affected by the external world. Understanding, or spontaneity, on the other hand, is the source of concepts. Understanding is what enables the subject to have thoughts about the external world. These two notions are of equal importance, Sensibility is the content of the thoughts in Understanding.

³⁸ Mind and World, by John McDowell, Harvard University Press 1996 p4

On McDowell's view sensibility or receptivity already has conceptual content.

“[T]he conceptual contents that are most basic in this sense are already possessed by impressions themselves, impingements by the world on our sensibility.”³⁹

This will avoid the confusion pointed out above between justification and causation. For what causes the subject to have a belief is also the way to justify that same belief, because perceptual experiential states are conceptual. This means that concepts do not come ‘into play’ in belief states that are caused by perceptual experiential states, rather, concepts are already in ‘the game’ in the perceptual experiential states themselves. In other words, the content of a perceptual experiential state is as conceptual as is the content of a belief state. This allows for the necessary inferences to take place. Thus when a subject sees an object in the external world he sees it as something.

In asking McDowell the same question that I asked Russell, that is, whether it is possible for a subject to ‘see’ an object without holding a belief at all, his answer would then be that there is no ‘seeing’ if it is not ‘seeing as’. The subject’s belief that there is an ocean is simply the endorsement of his perceptual experiential state with the conceptual content of an ocean. This way conceived perceptual experiential states do

³⁹Mind and World, by John McDowell, Harvard University Press 1996, p9 & 10

not only explain how the subject came to have belief states but can also justify those belief states. However, though perceptual experiential states have conceptual content they are not belief states. McDowell suggests that

“we should reserve the idea of belief for something that can be understood only in the context of the idea of spontaneity, the idea of an active undertaking in which a subject takes rational control of the shape of her thinking.”⁴⁰

The way the external world is presented to the subject is not under the subject's control, however it is within the subject's control to believe that the presentations are the way the external world is. In other words, belief states are mostly a matter of “choice” to the subject. Thus a belief state is reserved for the subject actively making up his mind. McDowell wants to include another Kantian notion of ‘freedom’ within the ‘space of reason’. Thus McDowell concludes that the content of perceptual experiential states is conceptual. In doing so he certainly seems to have taken care of any epistemological difficulties there might have been with perceptual experiential states.

As is represented in diagram d of Direct realism, McDowell considers perceptual experiential states to be ‘open’ to the external world itself. In other words, there is a direct relation between realms 2 and 3. which is

⁴⁰Mind and World, by John McDowell, Harvard University Press 1996, p60

represented by the dotted line. The subject of perceptual experiential states is directly aware of the existence of the external world, and the external world retains some of the properties that the subject perceives the external world as having even when he is not perceiving the properties. I say 'some' properties because I am fully aware of the fact that there are 'naïve' direct realists who hold that all the properties of the unperceived object in the external world are retained. However this position is strongly opposed by science, which has shown that unperceived objects in the external world do not retain all their properties. A problem that is put forward against direct realism is that the theory is unable to account for perceptual error and hallucination without falling into indirect realism. However McDowell is not bothered by such objections to direct realism as he takes a disjunctive conception of perceptual experiential states.⁴¹ Thus this direct relation between perceptual experiential states and the external world means that McDowell strangely conceives of the external world to be conceptually structured.⁴² As demonstrated by diagram d, all three realms are conceptual realms and thereby McDowell includes all three realms into the space of reason.

⁴¹ McDowell's disjunctive position will be considered in the reply to objection 1a further on in this section.

⁴² The claim that the external world is conceptually structured will not be evaluated in this paper as it belongs to metaphysics.

I will now turn to an evaluation of McDowell's account as it has just been presented.

Conceiving of the content of perceptual experiential states as conceptual creates phenomenological issues or tensions for accounts of the phenomenology of such perceptual experiential states. The conceptualist position can be challenged for a number of different reasons which were mentioned above and which will now be explained. The objections fall under at least three different 'camps', these are: the argument that points to the fine-grained discrimination in perceptual experience that cannot be captured by conceptual content. Another area of criticism that is raised against the content of perceptual experience as conceptual is the difficulty in explaining how a subject learns concepts. The last area of objections against the content of perceptual experience as conceptual is the inability to understand human infant and/or animal perception. I will deal with these criticisms in the order just mentioned.

Objection 1a

McDowell, and other conceptualist, insist that the subject does have all the necessary concepts available to him to adequately describe the fine-grained discrimination of his perceptual experience. Those concepts are available in the perceptual content itself.

“It is true that we do not have ready, in advance of the course our colour experience actually takes, as many colour concepts as there are shades of colour that we can sensibly discriminate. But if we have the concept of a shade, our conceptual powers are fully adequate to capture our colour experience in all its determinate detail.”⁴³

These, however, are not general concepts, such as ‘indigo’ and ‘blue’. The fine-grained aspects of the perceptual experience are expressible by the use of ‘demonstrative concepts’. These demonstrative concepts are made available by being given in a particular way in perceptual experience to the subject. Such demonstrative concepts are ‘that shade’, ‘this shape’, ‘this sound’ and ‘that man’. The demonstrative expression needs to be accompanied by a ‘sample’, which is given in the perceptual experience of the subject.

It is vital on McDowell’s account that these demonstrative expressions are indeed conceptual. To ensure this the demonstrative expression cannot only occur or be available to the subject just at the time the perceptual experience presents the sample. Whatever ‘capacity’ allows the subject to discriminate between the shades of colour and pick it out by using the demonstrative ‘that shade’ and the sample that is necessarily available at the time of the perceptual experience, also allows for the discrimination to live on in the subject’s mind even once the perceptual

⁴³Mind and World, Harvard University Press, 1996, p 58

experience itself has ended. The capacity is a “recognitional capacity”, which means that it can persist into the future, even though the future may be a very short time. It is because of the fact that it persists beyond the perceptual experience itself that it can be used in thoughts about the past (at the time the perceptual experience happened), that is, thoughts based on memory.⁴⁴ This is how “recognitional capacities” are conceptual; they can be exploited by the subject for as long as they last. For this to occur the subject is only required to possess the concept of a shade together with the capacities to have a particular shade in mind and the power to make discriminations. The conception of representational capacities fits in with the interplay between sensibility and understanding mentioned above.

There are a number of objections that are brought forward against the possibility for the demonstrative concepts to satisfactorily deal with the fine-grained phenomenological issues of perceptual experience. I will be dealing with the objections one at a time as well as including any reply McDowell might have to the raised objections. Richard G. Heck JR voices one such objection and it focuses on the very real possibility of misrepresentation.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Mind and World, by John McDowell, Harvard University Press, 1996, P57 &58

⁴⁵ Nonconceptual content and the “Space of Reason” by Richard G. Heck Jr. The Philosophical Reviews, Vol.109, No.4, October 2000

Heck asks why it should be accepted that the content of perceptual experience is conceptual as McDowell insists. Having demonstrative concepts does not imply that the content of perceptual experience is conceptual. Simply because the subject is able to form the concept that he did not possess prior to the experience, it does not follow that the content of the perceptual experience is conceptual. Only if it is not possible to explain how a subject came about the demonstrative concepts that are in the perceptual experience without supposing that these concepts are part of the content of the perceptual experience that made them available to the subject in the first place would it follow that the content of the perceptual experience is conceptual. Heck uses this point to mount an objection against McDowell's conceptualism.⁴⁶ For, as we saw, according to McDowell, a subject has the demonstrative concepts because he has had a perceptual experience with a certain kind of content, because the world was presented to the subject in a particular way. For example; Suppose the content of perception is conceptual, in saying that the colour of the ocean is 'that shade' I am giving a complete description of the content of my perceptual experience. This means that the subject's having a demonstrative concept is explained by his having such a perceptual experience. And, as Heck puts it,

⁴⁶ Nonconceptual Content and the "Space of Reason" by Richard G. Heck JR. The Philosophical Review, Vol.109 No.4 October 2000

“There would not seem to be sufficient distance between my having the experience and my possessing the concept for the former to explain the latter.”

The subject would not be able to have such a perceptual experience unless he already possessed the demonstrative concept ‘that shade’. This is because it is assumed that it is perceptual experience that makes demonstrative concepts available to the subject. However, the fact that perceptual experience makes the demonstrative concept available to the subject by being conceptual needs to be explained and not assumed.

The issue is to fix the referent of the demonstrative. It is not possible to explain what fixes the reference of a demonstrative concept if these concepts are part of the perceptual experience. Of course, McDowell would say that the referent is fixed by the world. The reference of the demonstrative concept ‘that shade’ is fixed by the part of the ocean that actually is of that colour. That is, the sample that is necessarily given at the time of the perceptual experience. This however allows room for the demonstrative concept ‘that shade’ to be a different content of the perceptual experience. Considerations of misperception reveal the problem. It is not possible to know whether the subject is having a perceptual experience that corresponds to the way the ocean in fact is. It is easy enough to imagine that a subject sitting on the beach with the

thought 'that shade' of the ocean could be experiencing the shade of the ocean differently to what it in fact is. Still, when the subject has the thought 'that shade', the truth condition is true. Thus, the perceptual experience and the thought have different content. This is because the perceptual experience is not presented in the way the world in fact is.

Reply to objection 1a

It seems that McDowell would like to ignore that there are such things as misperception. However, when he does have to deal with misperception he prefers a disjunctive account. This means that when a subject has a veridical perceptual experience 'that P' and a nonveridical perceptual experience 'that P', there is no common factor between these two states. In other words, no single perceptual experience can be both veridical and nonveridical. Thus McDowell could claim that it is not essential to have a theory of perceptual experience that can account for both veridical and nonveridical cases of perceptual experience. It is in this way possible for McDowell to sidestep the objection that demonstrative concepts cannot account for nonveridical cases of perceptual experience.

However, a disjunctive approach to misperception is problematic. Heck holds that

“a disjunctive account of what fixes representational content is plainly a nonstarter.”⁴⁷

It is not possible to know whether the perceptual experience is veridical until we know what the content of the perceptual experience is and it is not possible to know what the content of the perceptual experience is unless we know whether the perceptual experience is veridical. This is viciously circular. Equally as circular is a disjunctive account of what fixes the content of perceptual experience. What this means is that a disjunctive account of misperception is not satisfactory to deal with Heck’s objection to fixing the reference.

Objection 1b

Another objection against accepting demonstrative concepts to capture the fine-grained content of perceptual experience is mounted by Christopher Peacocke.⁴⁸ This objection focuses on the possibility of the referent to be fixed without the use of a general concept such as ‘shade’ or ‘red’ with the demonstrative ‘that’ or ‘this’ and thus discrediting the notion of conceptual perceptual content.

For the subject to have a mental state with the demonstrative concept ‘that shade’ the subject must have the general concept ‘shade’. The

⁴⁷ Nonconceptual Content and the “Space of Reason”, by Richard G. Heck Jr. *The Philosophical Review*, Vol 109, No. 4, October 2000, p497 - 498

⁴⁸ Does Perception Have a Nonconceptual Content?, by Christopher Peacocke, *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 98, January – June 2001 p244 - 250

presence of the general concept raises a problem for demonstrative concepts. According to Peacock, demonstrative concepts with a reference do not always require a general concept. As an example he uses the demonstrative 'there'. The demonstrative 'there' refers to a location without the 'help' of any general concept such as 'place' or 'location'. There is an important general connection between "ways" and "kinds" that can explain why a general concept such as 'shade', 'sound' or 'movement' is not always needed to accompany the demonstrative concept 'that' to secure the reference to a perceived property of an object. While sitting on the beach a subject might have the thought 'that is beautiful'. His thought might refer to the colour of the ocean, to the shape of the sand or to the movement of the waves. Peacocke contends that the type of perceptual demonstrative is individuated by the particular way that the content of the perceptual experience is presented to the subject. There is a specific and intrinsic kind of way for the subject to perceive a particular property of an object. This means that the way in which a shade is presented to a subject is intrinsically the way a shade can be perceived as opposed to the way a sound is perceived or a way in which a texture is perceived. Each way of perceiving is an intrinsic way for the kind to be perceived. The kind being the general concept. The connection between the way a property is perceived and the kind that is perceived is a "correctness condition". As Peacocke puts it;

“[F]or an object to have the property a given way presents it as having the object must meet a certain condition, and this condition is applicable only within objects of a given kind.”⁴⁹

Thus, the demonstrative concept ‘that’ which is given in a certain way has the reference fixed to a general kind. The way in which the demonstrative concept is made available to the subject in the perceptual experience fixes the reference of the demonstrative concept. This means that the demonstrative concept, which is made available to the subject in perceptual experience by a sample that is necessarily available at the time of the experience, does not need to be supplemented by a general concept for the reference to be fixed. However, the demonstrative concept cannot be identified with the way a property of an object is perceived. The way a property is perceived is intrinsic to ‘the kind’, that is, ‘the general concept’. This general concept lacks the ‘ties’ to a particular object, which is necessarily available in the perceptual experience. For example, the shape of two different objects can be perceived in the same way, either on the same or on different occasions. But, the reference of the demonstrative concept is fixed by the sample presented in the perceptual experience of a property of a particular object. In Peacocke’s words;

⁴⁹Does Perception have Nonconceptual Content?, by Christopher Peacocke, *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 98, January – June 2001, p246-247

“... It is constitutive of perceptual demonstratives that they can be used by the thinker only while the perceptual experience that makes them available continues.”⁵⁰

In short, Peacocke’s point is that demonstratives are not necessarily supplemented by general concepts. The reference of the unsupplemented general concepts is fixed by the ‘way’ the experience is presented. Thus unsupplemented demonstrative content is not conceptual.

Conceding the dependence of unsupplemented demonstratives on the occurrence of the perceptual experience would not allow for the content of perceptual experience to be understood as conceptual.

Reply to objection 1b

To this McDowell himself agrees, which is why he moved to recognitional concepts as opposed to demonstrative concepts. In McDowell’s own words:

“...We had better not think it can be exercised only when the instance that it is supposed to enable its possessor to embrace in thought is available for use as a sample....”

for so understood,

⁵⁰Does Perception have Nonconceptual Content?, Christopher Peacocke, Journal of Philosophy, Vol 98, January – June 2001,p249

“...[t]he putative thought-‘It looks to me as if something is of *that* shade’- is being construed as to lack the distance from what would determine it to be true that would be necessary for it to be recognizable as a thought at all.”⁵¹

This is why the demonstrative concepts of McDowell are recognitional concepts. Consequently I think there is more room for McDowell to manoeuvre than Peacocke allows him. To see this I need to contrast demonstrative concepts and recognitional concepts that will allow McDowell to escape the objection raised by Peacocke.

Perceptual demonstrative concepts, ‘that shade’, ‘that sound’ and ‘that shape’ end with the perceptual experience. That is, the subject does not have access to perceptual demonstrative concepts after the perceptual experience has ended. This helps fix the references. On the other hand, Recognitional concepts persists beyond the perceptual experience. Thus the subject of the perceptual experience relies on memory but still has access to the recognitional concepts after the perceptual experience has ended.

Thus, McDowell’s recognitional concepts allow him to get out of the objection that Peacocke has mounted against him. However, McDowell is not out of the woods, there are further objections to be raised against his version of demonstrative concepts.

⁵¹ Mind and World, by John McDowell, Harvard Press 1996, p57

Objection 1c

Recognitional concepts are available to the subject when there is no fixed reference by the sample available in the perceptual experience. This is the case because, as noted above, recognitional concepts 'out live' the perceptual experience and thus make use of memory. Yet this dependency on memory causes a problem for the recognitional concepts. For the capacity of memory cannot finely discriminate properties of objects as does perceptual experience.⁵² Recognitional capacities are thus restricted by the very capacities of memory. Peacocke also points out that if the memory structure to support the recognitional concepts were not available to the subject, the fine grain content of perceptual experience would still be present.⁵³ This means that whilst recognitional concepts, which are necessarily tied to memory (however short lasting it may be), may have helped to establish the content of perceptual experience to be conceptual, recognitional concepts do not 'cut' finely enough to be able to discriminate the fine-grained content of perceptual experience.

I do not think that McDowell can escape such a challenge. His conceptualism makes it impossible for him to account for the phenomenology of perceptual experiential states. This is a clear indication of how McDowell's account rides the seesaw.

⁵² Does Perception have a nonconceptual content?, by Christopher Peacocke, *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 98, January-June 2001

⁵³ Does perception have a nonconceptual content?, by Christopher Peacock, *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol 98, January – June 2001

Objection 1d

Ayers brings forth another objection. This time he focuses on the possibility of recognition prior to the subject's awareness of the object that is being demonstratively referred to. Ayers thinks that it is impossible for the subject to be able to recognise an object as 'that red' or 'that shape' unless the external world were open to perception before recognition. That is, he is challenging McDowell's insistence that the content of perceptual experience is conceptual in virtue of the subject possessing demonstrative concepts. Demonstratives are used "parasitically" on the content of perceptual experience. How can a subject recognise an object as 'that shade' if he is encountering 'that shade' for the first time? Recognitional concepts are used successfully when they express recognition. Thus making it extremely difficult to understand how a recognitional concept is employed successfully when the external world is presented to the subject in perceptual experience for the first time. Ayers holds that the reason a subject is able to have the thought 'the ocean is that shade' is not because the demonstrative 'that shade' is an element in the content of the present perceptual experience, but rather because the demonstrative 'that shade' "is employed parasitically on the content" of the present perceptual experience.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Is perceptual content ever conceptual?, by Michael Ayers, Blackwell Publishers 2002 p12

Peacocke agrees with Ayers that

“[t]here cannot be recognition when the perceptual property is encountered for the first time in a given way.”⁵⁵

What these objections have in common is not that demonstratives are available to the subject via his perceptual experience, but rather that the fact that demonstrative concepts, or in McDowell’s case recognitional concepts are available to the subject does not on its own prove that the content of perceptual experience is conceptual and that the concepts are able to ‘pick up’ the fine grained content of perceptual experience. Any conceptualist has to be able to reply satisfactorily to the above-mentioned objection and as we saw above this has not happened.

I will now move away from objections related to demonstrative / recognitional concepts and concentrate on other difficulties that are raised against the content of perceptual experience as conceptual.

Objection 2

Concerns about a subject’s ability to learn new concepts conclude that the content of perceptual experience cannot be conceptual.

⁵⁵ Does perceptual have a nonconceptual content?, by Christopher Peacocke, *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol 98, January – June 2001 p251

Remember, according to McDowell, a subject is affected by the external world through sensibility or receptivity and this is already conceptual, even if these concepts are recognitional (demonstrative) concepts. The consequence of this is that the subject's learning a new concept becomes superfluous. That is, how is the subject able to learn a new concept from examples of it presented in the perceptual experience that the subject has at the time he is taught the concept? If the content of perceptual experiences were conceptual, learning would be unnecessary for the subject would have grasped the concept at the time of the perceptual experience. Learning new concepts is only possible if the perceptual experience does not already involve the particular concept.

Objection 3

The last objection against conceptual content of perceptual experience that I will be looking at in this paper is about the distinction, or the lack thereof, between human adult and non-human animal perceptual experience.

McDowell does not seem to think that perceptual experience is at some level the same both for human adult and for "mere animals". In fact McDowell seems to think that it is a mistake to construe perceptual experience as having "ingredients" some of which are common both to human adults as well as to mere animals and other ingredients that are

only to be found in human adults. In holding that both human adults and mere animal share perceptual content that is not conceptual, and on top of this human adults are able to conceptualise that same content while mere animals cannot, we are causing a dilemma that is impossible to get out of. McDowell wants to insist that sensitivity to the environment is of a different “form” in human adults and mere animals. In McDowell’s own words:

“The thought is that the freedom of spontaneity ought to be a kind of exemption from nature, something that permits us to elevate ourselves above it, rather than our own special way of living an animal life.”⁵⁶

However not everyone agrees with McDowell’s views about non-human animal and human infant perceptual experience.

Just like human adults, non-human animals recognise, focus their attention and notice objects in the external world. The problem is that if the content of human adult perceptual experience is conceptual, thereby included in the “space of reason” it seems right from the start to prescribe an entirely different content of perceptual experience to animals and human infants. That, however, is problematic because as Ayers points out a dog is able to ‘infer’ that it is about to take a walk from seeing its owner putting on a coat. But, in describing such a situation the animal is being ascribed concepts that it does not possess. Even though the dog responds

⁵⁶ Mind and World, by John McDowell, Harvard University Press, 1996, p 64 - 65

to its owner's action, the dog does not know why it has done so. The reasons for acting the way it did are not 'available' to the dog. The dog has not consciously recognised its perceptual experience as a reason for acting. Dogs cannot reason in the way human adults reason, that is, the subject must be able to consider how the world appears to him, and that the perceptual experience is a reason for his actions, which will allow the subject to infer a belief from a perceptual experience. Human infants are just as unable to make such inferences. However, at some point a child gains the ability to reason. However, simply because the way we characterise the content of perceptual experience (as conceptual) makes it inaccessible to the animal we cannot conclude that the perceptual experience of the animal is not available to the animal itself.

Still the representational content of perceptual experience can be common both to human adult as well as animals. As Ayers maintains,

“what is supposed to make our doing so [recognising, noticing etc], but not animals' doing so, 'conceptual' as opposed to what it no doubt is in us, a necessary *precondition* of the acquisition of ...conceptual thought?”⁵⁷

To account for the difference between animal and human adult perceptual experience without denying animals awareness to their own perceptual experiences Ayers uses the distinction between primary and secondary

⁵⁷ Is perceptual content ever conceptual? By Michael Ayers, Blackwell Publishers 2002, p 14

knowledge. Primary knowledge is knowledge that a subject has together with the awareness of how he came about that knowledge. Secondary knowledge, on the other hand is knowledge that the subject cannot account for the, does not have awareness of, how he came about to have such knowledge. Examples of secondary knowledge are easily found in almost everyone when asked questions about particular events in history. The subject is able to give an accurate date or description of events but does not remember how he came about that information. Examples of primary knowledge is perceptual experience. This is because the subject is both aware of the way the world is presented to him at the time of the perceptual experience, and he is also aware of the perceptual experience as an object that is spatio-causally related to him, which makes the perceptual experience available to the subject for further inspection and scrutiny. As Ayers puts it:

“We know how we know what we know, just as we know how to get to know more.”⁵⁸

The content of “ordinary” perceptual experience ensures that the subject gains primary knowledge without knowing how the subject knows. Thus the distinction between primary and secondary knowledge does not exclude animals and human infants from awareness of their perceptual experiences because the perceptual experience of human adults and

⁵⁸ Is perceptual content ever conceptual? By Michael Ayers, Blackwell Publishers 2002, p 15

animals is the same in this regard. The perceptual experience is not different because there is no reason to deny the dog its awareness of spatio causal relations that the objects in the external world bear to it. A dog notices its bone in the corner of the room, it pays attention when something new is introduced to its environment and it sniffs at it inquisitively, in other words animals are sensitive to their environment. Then, given this, there is no reason to hold that animals and human infants do not have conscious perceptual experiences with content.

Christopher Peacocke agrees with Ayers that there is an “overlap” between human adult and animal perceptual experiences. According to Peacocke it is the case that animals have a perceptual experience of the “objective world” without the animal having a “conception of objectivity”. This means that the content of perceptual experience in animals has representational content which is what explains the animal’s actions in relation to its environment. What is distinctive of human adult perceptual experiences is that these representations are conceived of as subjective and objective, whereas the animal does not conceive of the perceptual representations as either subjective or objective. Peacocke goes on to draw a distinction between “something being *canonical* and its being *exhaustive*”.⁵⁹ He draws this distinction to explain the difference between content which is objective and to possess a conception of

⁵⁹ *Phenomenology and Nonconceptual content*, by Christopher Peacocke, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. LXII, No 3, May 2001

objectivity. It is through perceptual experience that the subject builds a representation of the external world. The basic methods that are used to build up this representation are canonical for any subject that has a mental state with objective content. For a subject with only objective content, the method is also exhaustive. If the methods for representation in perceptual experience were exhausted, rational thinking would not be possible. However, for a subject that has some conception of objectivity, the method for representation that is canonical is not exhaustive. This means that the object presented in the perceptual experience does not have the properties presented because of the outcome of some particular method. The properties of an object of perceptual experience may be examined and investigated using other means. These other means are possible only because the canonical methods are rather 'latched' onto the properties of the objects of perceptual experience. It is only subjects with a grasp of objectivity that have an "openness" to non canonical methods and flexibility in thinking. Thus a grasp of objectivity is a necessary prerequisite for rational thinking.⁶⁰

Consequently Peacocke holds that the 'overlap' between human adults and animal perceptual experience lies in the canonical methods of objective presentation of the external world. Such content is not conceptual.

⁶⁰ Phenomenology and Nonconceptual Content, by Christopher Peacocke, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. LXII, No 3, May 2001

How could McDowell respond to the objections just raised by Ayers and Peacocke? For one thing he could point out that the distinctions and similarities between human adult and non-human animal perceptual experiences that are offered by Ayers and Peacocke are based on non-empirical speculation. As such, it seems to be little more than a debate about hunches that need not be taken too seriously. McDowell could also point out that the category of 'non-human animals' is a wide one. The examples mentioned all involve high-order non-human animals: for example, dogs and such like. Thus it might be that McDowell would concede to a communality of perceptual experience at this level while denying it to other lower-order non-human animals where it is more plausible. In other words, McDowell might be willing to move around the boundary between human adults and non-human animal perceptual experience, while still holding to an account of perceptual experience that would exclude a particular category.

To evaluate McDowell's position, much more argument is needed around the role played by language. McDowell points to vague concepts such as "second nature" or "sapience" without much explanation. As such it is an incomplete position. Given its incompleteness, it seems that it is more desirable to prefer an account that offers a common convergence of

perceptual experience between human adults and non-human animals to one that excludes a particular category.

In short, for the content of perceptual experience to be conceptual the conceptualist is required to account for at least the three areas of objections, namely the fine-grain phenomenology, overlap with animal perceptual experience, and the learning of concepts. As we have seen the conceptualist has not been able to accomplish this. Conceptual content does not adequately deal with the descriptive issues of perceptual experiential states, as the main concern of this theory has been to account for the epistemic role of perceptual experiential states. The Direct Realism diagram above illustrates the very same point, that theories of perceptual experiential states with conceptual content are epistemically correct but phenomenologically defective. McDowell, and other conceptualist are riding the seesaw. Thus the claim that the content of perceptual experiential states is conceptual should be rejected.

Summary of part B

On the one side of the seesaw, theories that deny content to perceptual experiential states are, as we saw from the criticism mounted against them in section IV, inadequate to deal with the justificatory role perceptual experiential states need to play. On the other side of the seesaw, theories that conceptualise perceptual experiential states are, as was shown by the numerous objections in section V, ineffective in dealing with the phenomenological nature of perceptual experiential states. This is what I call riding the seesaw. If progress is to be made, a way of dismounting the seesaw needs to be found.

This part of the paper will present nonconceptual content for perceptual experiential states as a way of dismounting the seesaw.

As has been shown from the discussions in sections III and IV, perceptual experiential states must have content. From what was discussed in sections I and V, the content of perceptual experiential states cannot be conceptual. Thus it would seem that there must be such a thing as nonconceptual content.

Section VI *Nonconceptual content*

What is nonconceptual content? The task of defining nonconceptual content turns out to be problematic. Tim Crane points out that part of the problem stems from the fact that the notion of concept is taken for granted without itself being clearly defined.⁶¹ How should a concept be defined? Or as Jerry Fodor puts it:

“Is a theory of concepts a theory of concept possession or is it a theory of how concepts represent?”⁶²

⁶¹ The contents of experience Essays of perception, Edited by Tim Crane, Cambridge University Press, 1992 chp 6

⁶² In Critical Condition, by Jerry Fodor, The MIT Press, 2000, chp 3, p29

Tim Crane argues that a theory of concepts cannot be a theory of how concepts represent. This is because such a definition, that is, a definition of concepts understood as structured constituent parts of content, is neither necessary nor sufficient for a state to be conceptual. This is because there seems to be content that can be structured without being conceptual. Such an example is the content of computational states. What Tim Crane is pointing out is that nonconceptual content cannot simply be defined as content that does not have concepts as its constituent parts. Concepts do not only represent the external world, it is concepts that allow for inferential abilities. Thus a better theory of concepts is one that explains the capacity for concept possession. This fits in well with the notion of concepts that was used in section III. To recap in brief what was said in section III: what makes a concept the very concept that it is, are the conditions for possessing the concept and these very possession conditions are inferential capacities. So, for a subject to possess a concept is for him to be able to make inference. For a subject to be in a belief state he requires the possession of concepts as the constituent parts of the belief state, because beliefs do not simply represent facts about the external world, belief states are inferential states. Therefore, Crane concludes that a theory of concepts is a theory of concept possession.

Now, again from what was discussed in section III, a state has content because it represents the external world as being a certain way. This is content that represents facts about the external world and thus the content does not need to have constituent parts, the content is “whole”. All that is required is to know whether the content is true or false. This is what Christopher Peacocke calls a “correctness condition”, that is, conditions under which perceptual experience represents the world correctly.⁶³

It is now possible to define nonconceptual content. Nonconceptual content is a state where the subject need not possess the constituent concepts in order for him to be in that particular mental state. So, for the subject to represent that ‘a is F’ he does not have to possess the concepts ‘a’ and ‘F’. That means the subject does not have to be in a state with inferential constituents. It is thus that the subject is in a state with nonconceptual content. This is to be contrasted with a belief state whose content is conceptual and thus the subject must possess a concept, where possessing a concept is for the subject to be in a state with inferential constituents.

From what was concluded from the discussions in section IV and V, perceptual experiences are states that have nonconceptual content. In a perceptual experience the world is presented to the subject, there is

⁶³ The contents of experience Essays of perception, Edited by Tim Crane, Cambridge University Press, 1992 chp 5 p107 I will develop this notion further on.

however no need to suppose that the subject has a distinct concept for every single aspect in which the external world is presented to him. How should the fact that perceptual experiences have nonconceptual content be explained? Christopher Peacocke has an answer to this question, which I will now explain.

Peacocke suggests that there is a fundamental type of representational content. This content is individuated by specifying the ways of filling out the space around the subject. This means that the content involves a “spatial type”. The ways of filling out the space around the subject are consistent with the representational content being correct. This then means that the content is correct in an “instantiation”.

There are two steps that need to be taken to specify the spatial types. The origin and axes have to be fixed. The origin and axes are fixed by certain interrelated properties which help to constrain the instantiations of a spatial type. However the origin and axes cannot be a place and directions in the external world, because a type may be instantiated at many different places in the external world. Thus Peacocke gives the origin as the property of being the centre of the chest of a human body. The axes are given by the directions with respect to the centre as up, down, back, front, left and right.⁶⁴ The second step is to specify a way of filling out the space around the origin. To do this spatial types are needed and one of

⁶⁴ The content of experience, Edited by Tim Crane, Cambridge University Press, 1992, chp 5, ‘Scenarios, concepts and perception, p105-106.

these spatial types is a way of locating properties in relation to the labelled origin and axes. This is what Peacocke calls a 'scenario'. Thus the representational content is the positioned scenario. It is important to point out, as does Peacocke, that the fact that a concept is used to fix the scenario it does not mean that the concept itself is a component of the perceptual experience nor that the concept must be possessed by the subject of the perceptual experience. The scenario also has to be positioned in the real external world and given an assigned time for there to be a fixed correctness condition. The representational content gets its correctness from an instantiation by the real world. That is, the representation needs to correspond to the way the external world really is.

With the nonconceptual content of perceptual experience explained as a positioned scenario I will venture into looking at the objections raised against the notion of conceptual content of perceptual experience and see if nonconceptual content fairs any better at relieving the objections raised due to the need for demonstrative concepts to capture the fine-grained content of perceptual experience. As Peacocke himself explains:

“These nonconceptual contents must be mentioned in the possession conditions for perceptual and demonstrative concepts. A proper

appreciation of their role allows us to explain the possibility of noncircular possession conditions for these very basic concepts,....⁶⁵

In other words the nonconceptual content of perceptual experience is able to deal with all the objections raised against conceptualist theorist who hold that the phenomenological fine-grained content of perceptual experience is captured by demonstrative or recognitional concepts. The fine-grained content of the perceptual experience is captured in the scenario. The ways of filling out the space around the subject, which are consistent with the veridical perceptual experience of the subject, will be included in the scenario. Remember, the scenario, which is the spatial type, is what is involved in the content of the perceptual experience. This is not to be confused with descriptions of the type, the infinitely various ways of picking out the type where concepts, demonstrative or recognitional concepts are used.

Nonconceptual content understood as scenario content is spatial representational content. Such content can be attributed to certain animals and human infants though not to lower animal organisms. For scenario content requires identification of place over time to contribute to the construction of a cognitive map of the environment around the subject. This cognitive mapping involves some rudimentary possession of first-

⁶⁵ The contents of experience, Edited by Tim Crane, Cambridge University Press, 1992, 'Scenarios, concepts and perception' by Christopher Peacocke, chp 5, p134

person concepts. This is because it involves the subject building up a representation of the environment around him and his location in it.

The following diagram represents the relationship between the external world, the nonconceptual content of perceptual experiential states and belief states.

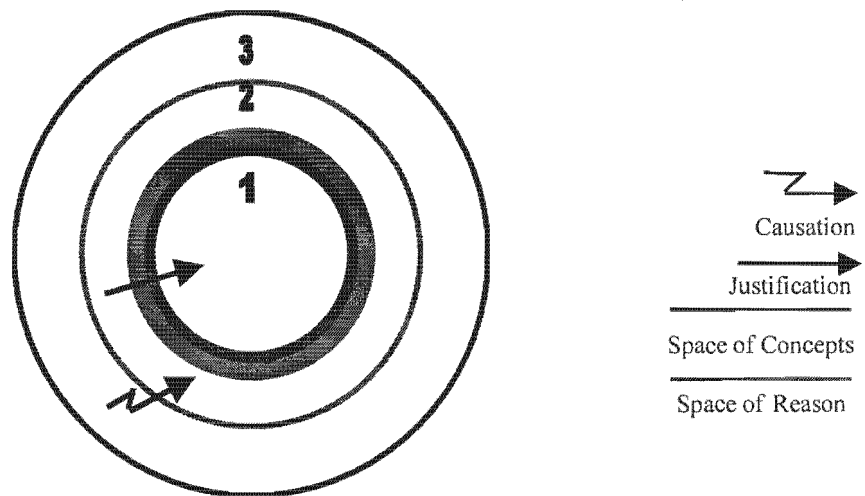


Diagram e

Conclusion:

I concede that the notion of nonconceptual content requires further extensive work. However my aim in this paper was only to show that nonconceptual content is a viable alternative which is worth further study and investigation considering the other ways, mentioned in sections IV and V, in which the content of perceptual experiential states has been unsuccessfully dealt with as each of these theories has created either epistemological or phenomenological difficulties depending on the focus of investigation that was adopted. In other words, this paper has shown how theories of perception ride the seesaw, and has presented a way for these theories to dismount the seesaw. Thus, the paper has successfully risen to the challenge that was set before it. Both the descriptive and the epistemological investigations can be simultaneously and plausible dealt with when the notion of nonconceptual content of perceptual states is invoked.

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